

# *Patristic Views on Why There Is No Repentance after Death*

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One of the ways in which Christian thought faces most squarely the question of the relationship of soul and body is in its attempts to envision the fate of the soul upon death. Although the New Testament offers abundant teaching on this subject, the teaching is presented in figurative language that leaves many questions unanswered. The question of the relationship of soul and body is rarely, if ever, a topic in its own right; the focus is rather on what one must do to prepare oneself for the coming judgment, as well as the hope of final salvation. Consequently, although some basic points are clear enough, there is much room for creative thought regarding the relationship of the soul and body and the way it figures into expectations of the afterlife.

Here I will focus on just one aspect of this complex set of issues, the question of whether there can be repentance after death. As we will see, the soul's inability to repent after death is owing, at least according to several leading thinkers of the Greek patristic tradition, precisely to its dissociation from the body. The effects of this dissociation were understood in various ways, so one must consult a range of thinkers to get a sense of the variety and complexity of patristic thought on this topic. Despite their differences, all agreed that only the union of soul and body is a moral agent capable of repenting in a way that would bring about a thoroughgoing change of character. Yet it can repent in another, weaker sense. Understanding this difference does much to illuminate what the body contributes to human moral agency.

## *A framework for discussion*

Let us first note two assumptions widely shared by thinkers in this tradition that provided a framework for further reflection. One was that the soul survives in a conscious form between death and the resurrection of the body.<sup>1</sup> This was inferred from a number of biblical

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<sup>1</sup> See N. Constanas, "To Sleep, Perchance to Dream": *The Middle State of Souls in Patristic and Byzantine Literature*, in: *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 55 (2001), 91-124; J.-C. Larchet, *Life after Death according to the*

texts, such as the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man, which portrays the souls of the dead in such an intermediate state, and the promise made by Christ to the penitent thief, “today you will be with me in paradise”. It was also strongly suggested by the practice of prayer to the saints, since this practice presupposes that the saints are in a position to hear and respond to prayer. The most obvious alternative was a belief in “soul sleep”. Although it did occur occasionally, this was generally regarded in the Greek tradition as a heresy.<sup>2</sup>

As a concomitant to this view, a distinction came to be widely drawn between two different occasions of divine judgment. The first is the particular judgment of each soul upon death, when it is allotted a temporary place of blessedness or suffering while awaiting the resurrection. Often this judgment was thought of as an interrogation or prosecution by demons, although naturally the demons were seen as acting under divine authority.<sup>3</sup> Eventually all must still face the Last Judgment, when the soul will be reunited with the body either to the “resurrection of life” or the “resurrection of judgment” (John 5:29). It would seem that the scriptural texts dealing with divine judgement are primarily about the latter; the particular judgment after death is not an explicit scriptural teaching, but was inferred in order to make sense of the existence of the soul in the intermediate state.

The second point of wide agreement was that, with one important exception noted below, there is no possibility for repentance after death. (By this is meant repentance of a sort that could lead to salvation; there will undoubtedly be “weeping and gnashing of teeth” as spoken of in the Gospels.) This was a straightforward inference from the many biblical passages dealing with the Last Judgment. As St. Paul says, “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that everyone may receive the things done in his body” (2 Cor 5:10). Here and elsewhere, it is emphatically the deeds done in this life that are the subject of judgment.<sup>4</sup> There is no biblical text about the Judgment suggesting that anything done after death can in any way alter the account that has thus been formed. This point seems to have been recognized quite early. Already in 2 Clement, dating from the early second century, we find the exhortation: “Let us, while we are in this world, repent with our whole heart of the evil things we have done in the flesh, that we may be saved by the Lord while we yet have time for repentance. For after we have departed out of the world we can no more make confession there, or repent any more”.<sup>5</sup>

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*Orthodox Tradition*, Rollinsford 2012; V. Marinis, *Death and the Afterlife in Byzantium: The Fate of the Soul in Theology, Liturgy, and Art*, Cambridge 2017.

<sup>2</sup> In the Syriac and Nestorian traditions it was more widely accepted. See discussion in Conostas, “To Sleep”, 2001, 109-112; id., *An Apology for the Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity: Eustratius Presbyter of Constantinople*, On the State of Souls after Death (CPG 7522), in: *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10 (2002), 267-285; Marinis, 2017, 88-89; M. Dal Santo, *Debating the Saints’ Cults in the Age of Gregory the Great*, Oxford 2012; D. Krausmuller, *Sleeping Souls and Living Corpses: Patriarch Methodius’ Defence of the Cult of Saints*, in: *Byzantion* 85 (2015), 143-155; id., *Christian Platonism and the Debate about the Afterlife: John of Scythopolis and Maximus the Confessor on the Inactivity of the Disembodied Soul*, in: *Scrinium* 11 (2015), 242-260.

<sup>3</sup> See Conostas, “To Sleep”, 2001, 105-109; Marinis, 2017, 12-23.

<sup>4</sup> For the major biblical passages on divine judgment see Matt 3:7-10, 7:21-27, 12:31-37, 13:47-50, 16:28, 25:31-46, Mark 8:38, 9:39-50, Luke 9:26, 12:16-21, 42-48, 13:24-30, John 5:28-29, Acts 17:30-31, Rom 2:5-10, 14:10-12, 2 Cor 5:10, 1 Thes 1:6-10, Heb 9:27, Rev 20:11-15.

<sup>5</sup> 2 Clem. 8.2-3; ed. and trans. J. Lightfoot / J. Harmer, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Grand Rapids 1984, 46-47, 89.

Similar statements occur in leading patristic authors such as Justin Martyr, Basil the Great, John Chrysostom, Maximus the Confessor, and John Damascene, and the same idea is implicit in many others who warn of the eternity of the punishments of hell.<sup>6</sup>

Yet it is one thing to affirm that there is no repentance after death, and another to explain why not. With hindsight it is surprising how long it took for this subject to receive much attention. The only early discussion I am aware of is that in 2 Clement. There, just before the passage quoted, the author offers the analogy of a vessel of clay that can be reshaped as needed by the potter until he puts it into the oven, after which it can no longer be mended.<sup>7</sup> Here God is the potter, we are the clay, and death is the fire. It is an appealing analogy, but no more than that, since no explanation is offered of what there is about death that makes it equivalent to the firing of the clay. After this we must wait until Nemesis of Emesa, in the later fourth or early fifth century, for a more sustained explanation.

### *Some further preliminaries*

Meanwhile thought on two other subjects was developed slightly more fully, and they are worth noting before we turn to Nemesis. One of these was the inability of the fallen angels to repent, along with the fixity in the good of those who are unfallen. Already in Tatian it is asserted confidently that the demons cannot repent because, although they possess aetherial bodies, they do not possess flesh.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, precisely why flesh is necessary for repentance is not explained. On the other hand, Cyril of Jerusalem assumes that the angels in general have both sinned and been forgiven.<sup>9</sup> Evidently on such a view the absence of flesh is not in itself an impediment to repentance and forgiveness. Cyril does allow that repeated and entrenched sin can remove this possibility, for he mentions later that the Devil has hardened his heart to the point where repentance is no longer possible.<sup>10</sup>

The Cappadocians offer some further thoughts on this subject, although they too are brief. According to Basil the angels are unable to sin, not by nature, but by the grace that has been imparted to them “from their creation”.<sup>11</sup> How this is consistent with some angels being fallen, he does not say. Gregory of Nyssa is also confident that the unfallen angels cannot now

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<sup>6</sup> See Just., *1 apol.* 52; Bas., *Spir.* 16.40 (citing Ps 33:6, LXX); Gr. Nyss., *anim. et res.* (PG 46 84B), *usur.* (GNO vol. 9, 204); Chrys., *hom. in Mt.* 14.6, *hom. in 2 Cor.* 9.4, *hom. in Heb.* 21.6, *Laz. et div.* 4; Theophilus of Alexandria, *Homily on Repentance and Self-control*; Barsanuphius and John, *Epistle* 600, 607; Dorotheus of Gaza, *Discourses* 12; Max., *ambig.* 65.3; Jo. D., *f.o.* 18 (=II.4), *Man.* 75; Symeon the New Theologian, *Ethical Discourses* 10; Theophylact of Bulgaria, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (on Matt 22:13), *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (on Luke 13:25). Many of these texts are discussed below. For references to patristic teaching on the eternity of hell see B. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church: A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology*, Grand Rapids 2010, and L. Farley, *Unquenchable Fire: The Traditional Christian Teaching about Hell*, Chesterton 2017.

<sup>7</sup> 2 Clem. 8.2.

<sup>8</sup> Tat., *orat.* 15.

<sup>9</sup> Cyr. H., *catech.* 2.10.

<sup>10</sup> Cyr. H., *catech.* 4.1.

<sup>11</sup> Bas., *Spir.* 16.38 (PG 32 140B); cf. *hom. in Ps.* 32 (PG 29b 333C-D), 44 (388C).

sin, although he does not explain why.<sup>12</sup> Gregory Nazianzen is more diffident. He explains that he would like to say that the angels are immovable owing to their immateriality and nearness to God. In view of the existence of the fallen angels, however, he concludes instead that they are “hard to move”.<sup>13</sup> He makes no distinction between their state prior to and after the fall of the evil angels, so that even today, presumably, they remain hard (but not impossible) to move.

It is evident from this brief survey that there was no consensus on the relationship between materiality and the ability either to sin or to repent, at least as regards the angels. The over-all tendency was to think that immateriality made it hard but not impossible to sin, and that, once having sinned, it made repentance difficult or impossible. However, the underlying chain of thought remained obscure. As we will see below in connection with Nemesisius and John of Damascus, different explanations could be given that were not always carefully distinguished.<sup>14</sup>

The other subject we should note is the understanding of Christ’s descent into Hades. This topic tended to be treated in isolation from other aspects of the afterlife, but it obviously is of relevance to our interest in the possibility of repentance after death. In fact, it is here that we find the sole exception to the general denial of the possibility of such repentance. The important questions pertaining to this topic for our purposes are, first, to whom precisely Christ preached, and second, what factors determined their reaction. As regards the first question, there was a tendency during the patristic era to widen the scope of Christ’s preaching beyond its explicit biblical basis. 1 Peter identifies those to whom Christ preached as “the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah” (3:19-20, RSV). Taken at face value, this refers to a relatively small group of people.<sup>15</sup> But already in the early centuries, to judge from the apocryphal literature, there seems to have been wide agreement that Christ preached at least to all the righteous of the Old Testament, and perhaps to the righteous gentiles as well. The audience of his preaching is variously described as “the patriarchs and prophets”, “Adam and all the saints [that] followed him”, “Adam and all them that were with him”, and “the righteous and the prophets”.<sup>16</sup> Clement of Alexandria asserts

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<sup>12</sup> Gr. Nyss., *hom. in Cant.* 15 (GNO vol. 6, 446-47).

<sup>13</sup> Gr. Naz., *or.* 38.9; cf. 28.31, 31.15, 40.7, 41.11.

<sup>14</sup> We may note in passing that the question of why the demons remain beyond salvation provoked a variety of answers in the West during the Middle Ages. David Keck offers a helpful summary: “The demons cannot be redeemed either because of the withdrawal of God’s grace (Peter Lombard); or the fact that since each angel is an individual genus, there is no common angelic nature that Christ could assume to redeem as he had done for humanity (Anselm of Laon); or the lack of external temptation, a sufficiently mitigating factor in the case of humanity (the school of Laon); or simply the sufficiency of angelic knowledge (Aquinas and Bonaventure)”. D. Keck, *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages*, New York 1998, 25.

<sup>15</sup> A few verses later there is a reference to the Gospel being preached “even to the dead”, but this may be merely a reference back to what was stated more fully earlier. The other main biblical text on Christ’s descent, Eph 4:8-10, gives no specific information about the audience.

<sup>16</sup> See, respectively, *Gospel of Nicodemus* 18.1, 24.2, *Gospel of Bartholomew* 9, *Epistle of the Apostles* 27; trans. M. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford 1953, 124, 139, 167, 494. See also further citations and discussion in H. Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, Crestwood 2009, 20-42.

more definitely that those who were saved from Hades included “those who had lived in righteousness according to the Law and philosophy . . . whose life had been pre-eminent, on repenting of their transgressions”.<sup>17</sup> Thus it was all the righteous, both Jews and gentiles, who were saved.

No doubt in saying this, Clement assumed that it was also *only* the righteous, for otherwise there would have been no point in stating such a restriction. Indeed, he goes on to explain that Christ preached to all so that “all the souls, on hearing the proclamation, might either exhibit repentance, or confess that their punishment was just because they believed not”.<sup>18</sup> John Chrysostom makes this point more fully. Citing the saying of Christ that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgement for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for the cities that reject his disciples, he observes that the descent of Christ “indicates the destruction of the might of death, not the loosing of the sins of those who had died before his coming”.<sup>19</sup>

The view that Christ by descending to Hades released all and only the righteous among both Jews and gentiles became, thereafter, virtually unanimous.<sup>20</sup> Admittedly, what it means to be “righteous” in this context is far from clear. Chrysostom states that the fundamental requirement was “not to worship idols, and to know the true God”.<sup>21</sup> Maximus the Confessor goes further, speculating that many of those who perished not only in the Flood, but later at the Tower of Babel, in Sodom, and during the plagues on Egypt—groups that undoubtedly included many idolaters—were ultimately saved when they responded in faith to Christ’s preaching.<sup>22</sup> For our purposes, the important point is that whatever response was given was determined by the character the dead had formed during their earthly life. To respond in faith no doubt involved repentance, but the repentance was “weak” in the sense that it merely required the rejection and disavowal of errors that had been committed in ignorance. As we shall see, in some cases a much stronger form of repentance may be needed, one that not all of the dead are able or willing to embrace.

### *Two early explanations: Nemesis and Dorotheus*

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<sup>17</sup> Clem., *str.* 6.6,45 (GCS 15, 454; trans. ANF, vol. 2, 490); cf. 2.9,43-44.

<sup>18</sup> Clem., *str.* 6.6,48 (GCS 15, 456; trans. ANF, vol. 2, 491). It is perhaps worth pointing this out, since one occasionally finds the claim that according to Clement Hades was emptied (e.g., Conostas, “*To Sleep, Perchance to Dream*”, 95).

<sup>19</sup> John Chrysostom, *hom. in Mt.* 36.3 (PG 57 416; trans. NPNF, Series I, vol. 10, 241).

<sup>20</sup> See the survey of texts in Alfeyev, 2009, 52-81, with some further clarifications regarding Cyril in D. Keating, *Christ’s Despoiling of Hades according to Cyril of Alexandria*, in: *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 55 (2011), 253-269. The treatment in J. Trumbower, *Rescue for the Dead: The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in the Early Church*, Oxford 2001, 91-108, is helpful but unpersuasive in its attempt to locate a disagreement on this issue between Chrysostom and Cyril of Alexandria.

<sup>21</sup> Chrys., *hom. in Mt.* 36.3 (above, n. 19).

<sup>22</sup> Max., *qu. Thal.* 7.2. Maximus is commenting here on the statement of 1 Peter that “the Gospel was preached even to the dead, so that they might be judged according to man in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit” (4:6). He interprets being “judged according to man in the flesh” to indicate that some had been sufficiently punished by their mutual reproaches and accusations.

Let us turn now to the more explicit discussions of the possibility of post mortem repentance. As I have mentioned, the first of these after 2 Clement was that of Nemesius, who addresses the issue near the beginning of *On the Nature of Man*. Nemesius sets up a parallel between two distinctly human privileges: that of receiving pardon through repentance, which is given to the soul on account of the body, and that of resurrection and immortality, which is given to the body on account of the soul. He contrasts in this respect human beings with the angels and demons:

Neither demons nor angels are thought worthy of repentance, and in this especially God is shown and declared to be both just and merciful. For the angels have no compulsion that leads them to sin, but they are free by nature from bodily affections, needs and pleasures, and reasonably there is no pardon given to them on repentance; but man is not only rational, but also an animal, and animal needs and other affections often pervert his reason. So when he becomes sober and flees from such things, and pursues the virtues, he receives the just mercy of pardon.<sup>23</sup>

This position bears a superficial similarity to that of Tatian, in that it makes the reason that human beings can receive forgiveness through repentance, while demons cannot, lie in our possession of bodies. Nonetheless, the underlying rationale is quite different. Whereas Tatian seemed to have in view an actual difference in ability, for Nemesius the difference lies in God's attitude: God is merciful toward human beings because our bodies furnish extenuating circumstances for sin, whereas the angels and demons, as spiritual beings, have no such excuse.

A little thought will reveal some difficulties with this explanation. One is that it leaves unclear precisely what is so critical about death. Granted that after death we no longer possess bodies, we *did* possess them when we sinned, so it seems that even after death God should still view our sins with leniency. Furthermore, Nemesius's explanation seems to posit a change in God's attitude from mercy prior to death to inexorable justice afterward. Such a view is questionable, not only in attributing change to God, but in the sharp line it draws between the two fundamental divine attributes of justice and mercy.

After Nemesius, later discussions turned away from speculating about God's reasons for granting forgiveness to focus instead (as had already been suggested in 2 Clement) on the abilities of the disembodied soul. Dorotheus of Gaza took a first step in this direction. He sees the union of the soul with the body as a blessing in that it prevents the soul from fixating single-mindedly on its own passions. This source of relief is removed upon death, with the result is that the soul, left alone with its passions, can no longer remember God:

Through this body the soul gets away from its own passions and is comforted; it is fed, it drinks, sleeps, meets and associates with friends. When at last it goes out of the body it is alone with its passions and, in short, it is tormented by them, forever nattering to

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<sup>23</sup> Nemes., *nat. hom.* 1.7, ed. M. Morani, *Nemesius: De natura hominis*, Leipzig 1987, 10; trans. R. Sharples / P. van der Eijk, *Nemesius: On the Nature of Man*, Liverpool 2008, 44-45.

them and being incensed by the disturbance and being torn to pieces by them so that it is unable to remember God. For the mere remembrance of God comforts the soul, as it says in the Psalm, “I was mindful of God and I was made glad” (Ps 76:3, LXX), and the passions do not allow this to happen.<sup>24</sup>

Obviously if the soul cannot remember God, it cannot repent. Dorotheus thus grounds the soul’s inability to repent in its isolation and entrapment within its own passions.

A similar line of thought is developed with much more rigor and sophistication by Maximus the Confessor. Maximus’s view depends heavily on the metaphysical understanding of God that he had inherited from earlier authors, particularly Dionysius the Areopagite. Before turning to Maximus, it will therefore be helpful if we examine the groundwork for his discussion laid by Dionysius.

### *Dionysius the Areopagite*

Although Dionysius does not deal specifically with the question of repentance after death, he discusses at some length the nature of demonic evil. His discussion became the most influential treatment of the nature of evil in the Greek patristic tradition. It provides a precedent (and, I suspect, an important influence) for the texts we will examine in Maximus.

Chapter 4 of Dionysius’s *Divine Names* is devoted to the divine names of the Good and the Beautiful. Having described at length how God as the Good and the Beautiful permeates all creation, Dionysius poses the question: “How is it that the multitude of demons has no desire for the Beautiful and the Good and indeed is inclined to the material and is lapsed from the angelic condition of longing for the Good?”<sup>25</sup> This is in essence the question of how one can have a full awareness of God as the Good and yet not be drawn to him. In answer, Dionysius first draws a parallel to a human being who lives intemperately:

He is deprived of the Good in direct proportion to his irrational urges. In that respect he neither is nor desires things that truly are (οὔτε ἔστιν οὔτε ὄντων ἐπιθυμεῖ). Nevertheless he has some share of the Good, since there is in him a distorted echo of real love and real unity.<sup>26</sup>

To the extent that he has succumbed to vice, such a person “neither is nor desires things that truly are”. This brief statement encapsulates a great deal of the longstanding incorporation of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophical psychology into Christian thought. Already in Plato, it is axiomatic that all human action is for the sake of the Good, although human perceptions of

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<sup>24</sup> Dorotheus of Gaza, *Discourse 12*; ed. L. Regnault / J. de Préville, *Dorothee de Gaza: Oeuvres spirituelles*, Paris 1963, 384; trans. E. Wheeler, *Dorotheus of Gaza: Discourses and Sayings*, Kalamazoo 1977, 183-184.

<sup>25</sup> Dion. Ar., *d.n.* 4.18 716A, ed. B. Suchla et al., *Corpus Dionysiacum*, Berlin 1990-1991, vol. 1, 162; trans. C. Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, New York 1987, 84 (modified).

<sup>26</sup> Dion. Ar., *d.n.* 4.20 720B, ed. Suchla, 1990-1991, vol. 1, 167; trans. Luibheid, 1987, 87 (modified).

the Good are inevitably partial and distorted.<sup>27</sup> That to attain true knowledge of the Good is also to attain or recover true being is intimated in the myth of the Cave in the *Republic* and the Charioteer myth in the *Phaedrus*. Aristotle (although not sharing Plato's doctrine of the Good) offers his own version of these ideas, particularly in his teaching that a life lived according to virtue is the full realization of human nature.<sup>28</sup> Thus for Aristotle, too, there is a sense in which by seeking the good one becomes more fully real.

The Cappadocian Fathers readily embraced the identification of God with the Good and the Beautiful, along with the ancillary notion that all human action is an obscure way of seeking the Good.<sup>29</sup> They also shared the commonplace identification (based on Exodus 3:14) of God with Being. It follows readily enough from these premises that to depart from the Good is in some sense to fall away from true being. Likewise, it follows that to turn away from God is to desire that which is not, and so is ultimately doomed to frustration. There is already a foundation for such views in the lapidary saying of Jesus, "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Mark 8:36). The Cappadocians in effect provided a philosophical framework in which this central Christian teaching could be seen as a corollary of fundamental truths about the nature of God and his relationship to the world.

Dionysius goes on to argue that the demons, like the intemperate man, are not evil by nature but have become evil by not "holding to their originative source".<sup>30</sup> They are good insofar as they are, but have through their own choice turned aside to that which is not:

Whatever is, is from the Good, is good and desires the Beautiful and the Good by desiring to exist and to live and to think the things that are. They [demons] are called evil because of the deprivation, the abandonment, and the rejection of the goods that are appropriate to them. And they are evil to the extent that they are not, and they desire evil by desiring what is not (τοῦ μὴ ὄντος ἐφιέμενοι τοῦ κακοῦ ἐφίενται).<sup>31</sup>

He goes on to repeat this point even more emphatically in chapter 7, devoted to the divine name of Wisdom. In the course of explaining how all intelligence (νοῦς) derives from divine Wisdom, he adds:

Even the intelligence of demons, to the extent that it is intelligence, comes from Wisdom, although insofar as it seeks to come upon what it desires irrationally, it neither knows

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<sup>27</sup> Plato, *Republic* VI 505e.

<sup>28</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I.7; cf. the fragments of the *Protrepticus* discussed in D. Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom*, Cambridge 2004, 3-5.

<sup>29</sup> For example, Bas., *reg. fus.*, Q. 2; Greg. Nyss., *virg.* 11, *anim. et res.* (PG 46 89B-97A), *v. Mos.* II.224-38; cf. D. Bradshaw, *Plato in the Cappadocian Fathers*, in: R. Fowler (ed.), *Plato in the Third Sophistic*, De Gruyter 2014, 193-210.

<sup>30</sup> Dion. Ar., *d.n.* 4.23 725A, quoting Jude 6.

<sup>31</sup> Dion. Ar., *d.n.* 4.23 725C, ed. Suchla, 1990-1991, vol. 1, 172; trans. Luibheid, 1987, 91 (modified).



nor truly wants (μὴ εἰδῶς μήτε βουλόμενος), and is better called a falling away from wisdom.<sup>32</sup>

To misuse the natural gift of intelligence so as to seek evil is, for Dionysius, a kind of psychic fragmentation, in that one does not even truly want that which one is seeking. It is in this sense that to turn toward evil is inherently futile and a diminution of being.

The *Divine Names* does not discuss whether there is any hope that either the demons or human souls in the afterlife might somehow repent. Given that the entire discussion just summarized is aimed at explaining how the demons could fully know God as the Good and yet remain alienated from him, it seems unlikely that Dionysius would have countenanced this possibility. A passage in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* offers some further clarification on this point. In the course of discussing baptism or “illumination”, Dionysius describes how “the goodness of the divine blessedness” illumines all who view it with the eyes of the intelligence. He then adds:

But it can happen that the self-chosen self-determination (ἡ αὐθαίρετος αὐτεξουσιότης) of intelligent beings can fall away from the intelligible light and can so desire what is evil that it closes off that vision with its natural capacity for illumination. It removes itself from this light which is ceaselessly proffered to it and which, far from abandoning it, shines on its unseeing eyes. With typical goodness that light hastens to follow it even when it turns away.<sup>33</sup>

Plainly Dionysius wishes to emphasize here the freedom of rational creatures to turn away from God no matter how much he may offer himself to them.<sup>34</sup> Although Dionysius does not explicitly state that it is impossible for the demons or human souls in the afterlife to repent, the whole thrust of his discussion seems to rule this out. There is some confirmation of this point later in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, when he denies that even the prayers of the saints can be of any avail for one who dies in a state of confirmed sin.<sup>35</sup>

Evidently, then, the demons cannot repent because they already possess full knowledge of God as the Good. Hence there is nothing more they could learn or encounter that could move them to change. As we will now see, Maximus seems to have accepted the force of this point and to have made it central to his own reflections.

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<sup>32</sup> Dion. Ar., *d.n.* 7.2 868C, ed. Suchla, 1990-1991, vol. 1, 195; my trans.

<sup>33</sup> Dion. Ar., *e.h.* 2.3,3 400A, ed. Suchla, 1990-1991, vol. 2, 74; trans. Luibheid, 1987, 205 (modified). That evil arises from a willful turning away from the divine light is a prominent theme in Gregory of Nyssa, e.g., *or. catech.* 6-7, *anim. et res.* (PG 46 120C-D).

<sup>34</sup> Again one thinks of a ready source in the Gospels: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” (Matt 23:37).

<sup>35</sup> Dion. Ar., *e.h.* 7.3,6-7. Admittedly, repentance and aid through prayer are not the same; the point is that Dionysius again emphasizes the final and conclusive significance of choices made in this present life.

Just as Dionysius seeks to explain how the demons can know God as the Good but persist in evil, Maximus seeks to answer the same question regarding human beings. The question is made more pointed by Maximus's insistence that the full revelation of divine goodness makes it impossible to seek any other, merely created good. In a well-known passage of *Ambigua* 7, Maximus describes how, in the afterlife, "our free will (τὸ αὐτεξούσιον) . . . will have surrendered voluntarily and wholly to God, and perfectly subjected itself to His rule".<sup>36</sup> He explains:

All things without exception necessarily cease from their willful movement toward something else when the ultimate object of their desire and participation appears before them and is, if I may put it this way, contained in them uncontainably according to the measure of the participation of each . . . For in that state nothing will appear apart from God, nor will there be anything opposed to God that could entice our will to desire it, since all things intelligible and sensible will be enveloped (περικληφθέντων) in the ineffable manifestation and presence of God.<sup>37</sup>

Maximus goes on to offer the analogy that God is like the sun and lesser goods like the stars: when the sun appears, the stars can no longer be seen. Helpful though it is, this analogy fails to capture the key point that lesser goods are "enveloped" within God as the Good; that is, all that is good in them is already precontained in God as their source.<sup>38</sup> We might tweak the analogy slightly by imagining that the stars, like the moon, shine only as reflections of the sun. Then it would be true to say that when the sun appears, the light that had previously appeared in them is not only overwhelmed, but is more directly and truly manifest. It is for this reason that the blessed feel no temptation to seek any created good before or instead of God.<sup>39</sup>

The passage is not only about the blessed, however, for it says that *all* things cease from their movement toward any lesser good. The remainder of *Ambigua* 7 elaborates further. In discussing the reason why God created man as a unity of body and soul, Maximus explains that God's aim was that through the rational governance of the body, "the many, though separated from each other in nature, might be drawn together in a unity as they converge around the one human nature". This cryptic statement foreshadows the view of humanity's vocation as cosmic

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<sup>36</sup> Max., *ambig.* 7.11, ed. and trans. N. Conostas, *Maximos Confessor: On Difficulties in the Church Fathers*, Cambridge 2014, vol. 1, 89.

<sup>37</sup> Max., *ambig.* 7.12; ed. and trans. Conostas, 2014, vol. 1, 91-93.

<sup>38</sup> The term used by Maximus, *περικληφθέντων*, echoes the similar term *προείληφε* used by Dionysius to describe the relationship of God to creatures (*d.n.* 1.7 597A, 5.8 824C, 7.4 872C).

<sup>39</sup> See also *Ambigua* 15.7: in the presence of God "every motion of what is naturally moved ceases, henceforth having nowhere, and no means whereby, and nothing to which it could be moved, since it has attained its goal and cause, which is God, who is Himself the limit of the infinity itself that limits all motion" (ed. and trans. Conostas, 2014, vol. 1, 369, slightly modified); also a similar statement at *To Thalassius* 22.7.

mediator—a vocation fulfilled by Christ—that Maximus develops later in the *Ambigua*.<sup>40</sup> Its importance for present purposes lies in the immediate continuation:

When this happens, “God will be all things in everything” (1Cor 15:28), encompassing all things and making them subsist in Himself, for beings will no longer possess independent motion or fail to share in God’s presence, and it is with respect to this sharing that we are, and are called, “gods”, “children of God”, the “body” and “members” of God, “portions of God”, and other such things, in the progressive ascent of the divine plan to its final end.<sup>41</sup>

Taken at face value this passage might seem to be an assertion of universalism. Some have indeed taken it in that sense.<sup>42</sup> However, it is hardly unknown for Maximus to make a sweeping statement that he then qualifies in various ways. Since he has as yet not even referred to the Final Judgment or to those ostensibly damned, we would do well to see what he has to say on that subject before drawing any final conclusion.

When Maximus at last turns to the fate of the damned, in *Ambigua* 20, it is clear that he sees a sharp separation between them and those who are to be divinized. Having explained how divinization is something beyond nature, he adds:

In the same manner, but in the case of what is contrary, the sages give the names of “perdition”, “Hades”, “sons of perdition”, and the like, to those who by their disposition have set themselves on a course to nonexistence (τὸ μὴ ὄν ἑαυτοῖς ὑποστήσαντας), and who by their mode of life have reduced themselves to virtual nothingness (αὐτῶ [sc. τῷ μὴ ὄν] διὰ πάντων γενομένου παρεμφερεῖς).<sup>43</sup>

As we see here, Maximus understands some as through their own disposition setting themselves on a path to “virtual nothingness”. This is an idea that we have seen foreshadowed in Dionysius’s treatment of the intemperate man, who “neither is nor desires things that truly are”, and the demons, who “are evil to the extent that they are not”. It is in light of this descent into non-being that God can be “all things in everything” and yet evil can persist.

Maximus returns to this subject in the next *Ambiguum*. There he first describes the soul that, by the right use of its natural powers, “arrives at God”. He then adds in contrast:

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<sup>40</sup> See Max., *ambig.* 41.1-9.

<sup>41</sup> Max., *ambig.* 7.31; ed. and trans. Conostas, 2014, vol. 1, 121 (slightly modified).

<sup>42</sup> For example, I. Ramelli, *A Larger Hope? Universal Salvation from Christian Beginnings to Julian of Norwich*, Eugene 2019, 184. See also similarly categorical but brief statements of Maximus elsewhere: Christ will accomplish at the end of the ages “a universal renovation of the whole human nature” (*exp. Ps.* 59, PG 90 857A; cited by Ramelli, 2019, 179); Christ “accomplished the complete salvation of humanity” and “divinized all humanity” (*ambig.* 4.5, 7, ed. and trans. Conostas, 2014, vol. 1, 27; cited by Ramelli, 2019, 182); Christ “filled the world above, by divinely bringing about on His own the salvation of all” (*ambig.* 31.6, ed. and trans. Conostas, 2014, vol. 2, 47; cited by Ramelli, 2019, 183).

<sup>43</sup> Max., *ambig.* 20.2; ed. and trans. Conostas, 2014, vol. 1, 411.

If, however, it makes the wrong or mistaken use of these powers, delving into the world in a manner contrary to what is proper, it is obvious that it will succumb to dishonorable passions, and in the coming life will rightly be cast away from the presence of the divine glory, receiving the dreadful condemnation of being estranged from relation with God for infinite ages, a sentence so distressing that the soul will not be able to contest it, for it will have as a perpetually relentless accuser its own disposition, which created for it a mode of existence that in fact did not exist (τὴν ὑποστήσασαν τὸ μὴ ὄν διάθεσιν κατήγορον ἔχουσα).<sup>44</sup>

Plainly Maximus is not teaching here a form of annihilationism, for the reference to “infinite ages” shows that he assumes this state will continue forever. He is instead, much like Dionysius, drawing out the implication of the identification of God as Being. Both authors present the diminution into non-being as a consequence of the misuse of the natural powers bestowed by the Creator. Such non-being is not the loss of existence; it is continuation in existence in a diminished and perpetually frustrated state.

Maximus again returns to this subject in *Ambigua* 42, where he connects it with his well-known doctrine of the *logoi* of beings.<sup>45</sup> He explains that it is in accordance with their *logoi* that all things receive either well-being through virtue or ill-being through vice, states that are the completion or failure of participation in God. Nonetheless, God offers himself “wholly and simply to all”:

To put it concisely, they [creatures] move in accordance with their possession or privation of the potential they have naturally to participate in Him who is by nature absolutely imparticipable, and who offers Himself wholly and simply to all—worthy and unworthy—by grace through His infinite goodness, and who endows each with the permanence of eternal being, corresponding to the way that each disposes himself and is (διατέθειται τε καὶ ἔστι).<sup>46</sup>

Here again it is the way that each has freely formed his own disposition that determines whether and how he participates in God as the Good. As the passage goes on to explain, to participate or not is tantamount to reward or punishment:

For those who participate or do not participate proportionately in Him who, in the truest sense, is and is good, and is forever, there is an intensification and increase of punishment for those who cannot participate, and of enjoyment for those who can participate.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.12; ed. and trans. Conostas, 2014, vol. 1, 439. The final phrase could be rendered more literally, “having for an accuser its disposition which has given subsistence to (ὑποστήσασαν) non-being”.

<sup>45</sup> For a brief discussion of the *logoi* see Bradshaw, *Aristotle*, 2004, 201-206.

<sup>46</sup> Max., *ambig.* 42.15; ed. and trans. Conostas, 2014, vol. 2, 149.

<sup>47</sup> Max., *ambig.* 42.15; ed. and trans. Conostas, 2014, vol. 2, 149.

To be capable of participating in the Good requires oneself becoming good, so far as within one's power; likewise, to fail to become good, or (worse) to become positively evil, brings with it a corresponding incapacity. This is an axiom of classical philosophy that had been developed in various ways by Plato, Aristotle, and the Neoplatonists and was incorporated into Christian thought by the Cappadocians and Maximus.<sup>48</sup> Maximus draws on it here to explain how to have developed an evil disposition leads not only to a diminishment into non-being but also to alienation from all that is good.

The question remains how it can be true that, as Maximus states in *Ambigua* 7, at the full manifestation of the Good “*all things without exception* cease from their willful movement toward something else”. Presumably the answer must be that the damned no longer move in any way toward any subordinate good, but are equally unable to participate in God as the Good. Maximus makes this explicit in *Ambigua* 65. There we learn:

To those who have willfully used the principle of their being contrary to nature, He [God] rightly renders not well-being but eternal ill-being (τὸ ἀεὶ φεῦ εἶναι), since well-being is no longer accessible to those who have placed themselves in opposition to it, and they have absolutely no motion after the manifestation of what was sought, by which what is sought is naturally revealed to those who seek it.<sup>49</sup>

Although Maximus speaks here of God “rendering” eternal ill-being to the damned, we must remember that this is the same state described in *Ambigua* 7 as that in which “nothing will appear apart from God”. Evidently the same divine presence that is experienced by the blessed as bliss is experienced by the damned as torment. Maximus states this explicitly elsewhere.<sup>50</sup> He also offers a number of lengthy descriptions of the torments of hell, envisaging it as “separation from God and his holy powers, and belonging to the devil and the evil demons, a state which lasts forever, without any prospect of our ever being liberated”.<sup>51</sup> Whatever its torments, the

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<sup>48</sup> Classical antecedents include the Platonic understanding of the vision of the Good as requiring the acquisition of the virtues (*Republic* VII) and the Aristotelian view of habituation into the virtues as enabling moral knowledge (*Nicomachean Ethics* I.3-4, II.1, III.4, VI.5). For the adaptation of such views by the Cappadocians and Maximus see Bradshaw, *Aristotle*, 2004, 172-178, 197-201.

<sup>49</sup> Max., *ambig.* 65.3; ed. and trans. Constanas, 2014, vol. 2, 281.

<sup>50</sup> “When . . . I say ‘things contrary to nature,’ I mean the privation of grace producing unspeakable pain and suffering, which God is accustomed to bring about by nature when He unites Himself contrary to grace to those who are unworthy. For God, in a manner known only to Himself, by uniting Himself to all in accordance with the quality of the disposition that underlies each, imparts perception to each one, inasmuch as each one was formed by Himself for the reception of Him who at the end of the ages will be completely united to all”. Max., *qu. Thal.* 59.8 (PG 90 609C); trans. M. Constanas, *St. Maximos the Confessor: On Difficulties in Sacred Scripture*, Washington 2018, 418.

<sup>51</sup> Maximus, *ep.* 1 (PG 91 389A), trans. B. Daley, *Apokatastasis and “Honorable Silence” in the Eschatology of Maximus the Confessor*, in: *Maximus Confessor: Actes du Symposium sur Maxime le Confesseur*, eds. F. Heinzer / C. Schönborn, Fribourg 1982, 309-339, at 334-35; cf. similar statements at *ep.* 1 (380D-383A), 4 (416B-417A), 24 (612B-C).

worst aspect of hell is to be “joined forever with those who hate and are hated” even while one is “separated from the One who loves and is loved”.<sup>52</sup> And this is, in turn, a self-chosen and self-determined state.

#### *Later authors*

Although it is not possible to give here a full history of our topic in the later Byzantine era, a couple of prominent authors may be noted to give some sense of further developments. John of Damascus largely follows Maximus, although in a way that reflects his own distinctive concerns. In *On the Orthodox Faith* he says simply that “although man, by reason of the infirmity of his body, is capable of repentance, the angel, because of his incorporeality, is not”.<sup>53</sup> This mixes elements of two distinct lines of thought: in referring to the “infirmity” of the human body, John seems to have in mind the idea of Nemesis that God is willing to forgive human sin because of our corporeality, whereas in referring to angels as not “capable” of repentance, he seems to have in mind a limitation that is intrinsic rather than a matter of divine prerogative. Unfortunately, neither line of thought is explained further.<sup>54</sup>

We find rather more in his dialogue *Against the Manicheans*. There John, much like Maximus, affirms that in the age to come God intentionally punishes no one. Rather, each makes himself capable of participating in God in his own way, a participation that is delight to some and punishment to others.<sup>55</sup> John goes on to add that God always provides good things to all, but not all are willing (θέλει) to receive them, preferring instead various lesser goods that in the age to come will no longer be available.<sup>56</sup> After death sinners still desire the pleasures of their former life, but there is no longer the material by which to sin (τὰς ὕλας τῆς ἀμαρτίας), so they exist in perpetual frustration, and this frustration is itself a form of punishment.<sup>57</sup> John thus offers two distinct ways of understanding eternal punishment: (1) as the unmediated presence of God to those whose characters are such as to find his presence repugnant, and (2) as the deprivation of the lesser goods that the soul, due to its own voluntary formation, eternally desires. These are not incompatible, and are clearly in John’s mind different ways of describing the same state.

Whereas the Maximian influence is evident in John, Theophylact of Bulgaria, in his widely read biblical commentaries (c. 1100), returns to a more purely scriptural approach.

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<sup>52</sup> Maximus, *ep.* 1 (PG 91 389B).

<sup>53</sup> Jo. D., *f.o.* 17 (= II.3), ed. P. Kotter, *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, Berlin 1969-1988, vol. 2, 46; trans. F. Chase, *Saint John of Damascus: Writings*, Washington 1958, 206.

<sup>54</sup> See also *Ibid.*, 18 (= II.4), stating that there can be no repentance for demons after their fall, just as there can be none after death for man; and 44 (= II.30), stating that it was best for man not to attain incorruption while still untested, since it was “by reason of his incorruptibility” that the Devil, having fallen, could no longer repent. None of this is explained.

<sup>55</sup> Jo. D., *Man.* 44 (PG 94 1545D-1548A).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 71 (PG 94 1570B-C).

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 75 (PG 94 1575A-C).

Commenting on the parable of the guest who is cast out from the feast because he lacks a wedding garment (Matt 22:11-13), he writes:

The Lord then says to His servants, the angels of punishment, “bind his hands and feet” (Matt 22:13), that is, the soul’s powers of action. For in this present age is the time to act and to do, but in the age to come all of the soul’s powers of action are bound, and a man cannot then do any good thing to outweigh his sins. Gnashing of teeth is the meaningless repentance that will then take place.<sup>58</sup>

Although Theophylact here speaks of seeking to “outweigh” sins formerly committed, he is not thinking of divine judgment as a weighing of sins against good deeds, but rather of what is required to repent in a way that is truly efficacious. This emerges more clearly in a similar passage in his commentary on the Gospel of Luke. Discussing the parable of the master of the house who says to those who knock at his door, “I know not whence you are” (Luke 13:24-30), he explains:

Indeed it is while we are still in this life that we must make spiritual preparation for the feast, before “the Master of the house is risen up”, that is, risen up and come forth to judge, “and hath shut the door” (Luke 13:25), which means, closed the pathway of virtue. For further progress on that path cannot be made after we leave this life. It is only while we are in this life that we can walk the way of virtue. After their death, those who lived negligently in this life at last begin to knock at the door, only now, because of their useless repentance, seeking to find the path of virtue, calling out for it with mere words like so much pounding and banging, but devoid of any deeds.<sup>59</sup>

Only in this life is it possible to “walk the way of virtue”. In the afterlife, good intentions are “devoid of any deeds” and so are merely a useless “pounding and banging” at the door.

Theophylact here builds upon a longstanding understanding of the nature of repentance. John Chrysostom was perhaps its most influential exponent. Commenting on the warning in the book of Hebrews that “it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened . . . if they then commit apostasy” (6:4-6), he lists six elements of a true and lasting repentance. They are: condemnation of one’s sin, humbleness of mind, intense prayer with tears, almsgiving, forgiveness, and leading others away from sin.<sup>60</sup> Elsewhere he says more simply that “repentance is not doing the same again”—and he goes on to add that to heal the wound one must also do the opposite, so that if one has been covetous the cure is

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<sup>58</sup> Theophylact of Bulgaria, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (PG 123 388B-C); trans. C. Stade, *The Explanation by the Blessed Theophylact of the Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew*, House Springs 1992, 189.

<sup>59</sup> Theophylact, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (PG 123 921C); trans. C. Stade, *The Explanation by Blessed Theophylact of the Holy Gospel according to St. Luke*, House Springs 1997, 173.

<sup>60</sup> Chrys., *hom. in Heb.* 9.8 (PG 63 80-81); cf. similar discussions at *Ibid.*, 12.7, 31.3-6, *hom. in Mt.* 10.6-7, *hom. in 2 Cor.* 4.6, and *diab.* 2.6 (using the section numbers in NPNF).

almsgiving, if one has found fault with another the cure is to show him kindness, and so on.<sup>61</sup> Obviously for Chrysostom repentance requires more than simply regret for one's deeds. The same point could be illustrated from a wide range of patristic authors.<sup>62</sup> This is not to say that there is a requirement for reparation or atonement. Rather, the issue is what is required in order for an attitude of regret and a desire to change to penetrate, as it were, into the depths of the soul. Nothing is more plain from experience than that one may hate what one has done, want to change, and even believe that one has done so, but find, when put to the test, that one has not. The attitude of Chrysostom and Theophylact is therefore one of simple realism. It recognizes that repentance, in order to be real, must be realized and made effective through action.

Of course, there are well-known examples of persons who repented without much opportunity for action—most famously the thief on the cross, as well as those martyrs who embraced the Faith at the last moment, such as the fortieth of the Forty Holy Martyrs of Sebaste. Such persons were still in the body, and for them the mere act of facing death in an attitude of faith was one of tremendous significance. Presumably in their case to have brought this act to completion performed the crucial work of transforming the soul. After death, however, there can be no faith, for the truth has been fully revealed; and even if there were, it could not provide a basis for action. Thus there is no way that the difficult work of repentance can begin.

### *Conclusion*

What can we learn from the views here examined about the underlying conception of the relationship of soul and body? Setting aside Nemesis (whose approach to our question was idiosyncratic), all of the authors we have considered emphasize that the soul after death is no longer a moral agent, in the sense that it can no longer perform acts that would decisively transform its moral character. Their reasons for this conclusion varied. For Dorotheos, the crucial issue is the soul's entrapment in its own passions; for Maximus, it is the full manifestation of God as the Good, which renders further movement impossible; for John it is the absence of the materials that would enable satisfaction of the soul's sinful desires; for Theophylact, it is the inability to engage in bodily actions that could transform regret into repentance. These various explanations are not incompatible, and it seems likely that each of the authors would have accepted those of the others as having at least a good deal of truth. The different emphases of each author are presumably due to their specific aims and contexts: Dorotheos writes as a spiritual guide, Maximus as a speculative theologian, John as a polemicist, Theophylact as a biblical exegete. In addition, they may to some extent be focusing on different periods of the afterlife. Maximus, at least, is evidently writing about the state of souls after the resurrection and Last Judgment, when God will be fully manifest, whereas what the others say would apply equally before and after the Last Judgment.

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<sup>61</sup> Chrys., *hom. in Jo.* 34.3 (PG 59 497).

<sup>62</sup> See G. Lampe (ed.), *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford 1961, s.v. *μετάνοια*, II.A and H; A. Torrance, *Repentance in Late Antiquity: Eastern Asceticism and the Framing of the Christian Life c. 400-650 CE*, Oxford 2013.



Of course, all such arguments must be seen in the context of other longstanding Christian beliefs. In particular, there is the descent of Christ into Hades. As noted earlier, the souls in Hades who respond to Christ's preaching repent in the minimal sense of renouncing errors committed in ignorance. There is nothing about this that contradicts any of the views we have examined. Since these souls are righteous, they are not trapped in their passions or focused on evil, as envisioned by Dorotheus and John; nor do they need to repent in a way that would transform the depths of the soul, as in Theophylact; nor, of course, has God yet been made fully manifest to them, as in Maximus. Bearing this in mind, it would seem that the soul can act apart from the body, but only in the minimal sense of further expressing and acting on the basis of its established character. What it cannot do is engage in the thorough and heartfelt change that is *metanoia* in the biblical sense.

This is a point of some importance for the perennial debate over universalism. The patristic authors who deal with Christ's descent to Hades seem to take for granted that he preached only to those who were in Hades at the time (that is, upon his death in 33 A.D.). They do not address whether his audience might somehow include all in Hades, including those who died (or will die) long after the time of Christ. It might seem that simple chronology would rule this out. However, time itself is not a simple matter in patristic thought. Basil holds that, whereas earthly time is the interval "coextensive with the existence of the cosmos", there exists also a kind of "hypertime" (ἡ υπέρχρονος) of the angels.<sup>63</sup> He does not attempt to define its character precisely, except to note that it existed prior to the creation of the physical world. His brother Gregory of Nyssa takes this subject a bit further. He speculates that the angels are not subject to the loss of the past as we are, but instead live in a kind of "ever-present good" that is constantly growing through their own growth in goodness.<sup>64</sup> For both authors, although the angels can enter into human time, they exist also in their own quasi-temporal order that is independent of and superior to our own.

Similarly, nothing prevents Hades from having its own quasi-temporal order that is very different from ours. Precisely what it is like is unknown to us. As Creator, however, Christ could surely preach to all the dead from all times in a way that occurs, from an earthly standpoint, upon his death in 33 A.D.

It may also be (although whether this should be regarded as a distinct possibility is unclear) that Christ is now present in Hades in a way that conveys to those there a knowledge of the Gospel as effectively as did his preaching. Hilarion Alfeyev has suggested that something like this is implied in the Prayer of the Anaphora in the Liturgy of St. Basil. There Christ is described as follows:

Descending through the Cross into hell that he might fill all things with himself, he loosed the pangs of death. He arose on the third day, having made for all flesh a path to

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<sup>63</sup> Bas., *Eun.* 1.21 (PG 29 560B), *hex.* 1.5 (PG 29 13A); cf. D. Bradshaw, *Time and Eternity in the Greek Fathers*, in: *The Thomist* 70 (2006), 311-366.

<sup>64</sup> Greg. Nyss., *hom. in Cant.* 6 (GNO vol. 6, 174); cf. similar descriptions of the life of the blessed at *hom. in Cant.* 8 (GNO vol. 6, 245-247) and *anim. et res.* (PG 46 92A-96C).

the resurrection from the dead, since it was not possible for the Author of life to be conquered by corruption.<sup>65</sup>

In making “for all flesh a path to the resurrection from the dead”, Christ, on this reading, makes the Gospel available to all regardless of the date of their death in a way that is simply unknown to us.

On either of these views, the descent of Christ into Hades continues to present an opportunity for what I referred to earlier as “weak” repentance. Such an understanding would seem to be more consistent with both divine justice and divine mercy than to suppose that this opportunity is not somehow extended to all.<sup>66</sup> Yet it remains that there can be no repentance in the deep, character-changing sense after death. This was a point of consistent agreement throughout the Greek patristic tradition.<sup>67</sup> The attempt to understand it led patristic authors to engage a wide range of issues, achieving ultimately a deeper understanding of the integral role of the body in achieving salvation.

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<sup>65</sup> Liturgy of St. Basil as cited by Alfeyev, 2009, 218. “Hell” is actually ᾍδης, Hades.

<sup>66</sup> On the other hand, it seems unlikely that (as Alfeyev envisages) everyone might respond positively to Christ’s preaching. At least the prayer seems to assume otherwise, for it goes on to add, “and he shall come again to render to every man according to his works”. This would hardly be necessary if Hades were by that time already empty.

<sup>67</sup> It is noteworthy that even Gregory of Nyssa, who is usually regarded as a universalist, seems to have taken for granted that there can be no repentance after death (*anim. et res.*, PG 46 84B; *usur.*, GNO vol. 9, 204). He envisioned the recalcitrant as being saved through a kind of forcible purification of the impurities in their soul, as in his analogy with a mud-encaked rope being drawn forcibly through a narrow hole (*anim. et res.*, PG 46 100A-B).